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American Society for the Control of Cancer

BOSTON LOCAL COMMITTEE

DR. EDWARD REYNOLDS
321 Dartmouth Street
Chairman

MRS. R. C. STURGIS
153 Beacon Street
Secretary

CANCER A CONTROLLABLE DISEASE

How the Women's Clubs Can Help the Less Intelligent

By

EDWARD REYNOLDS, M. D.

Read at the Annual Meeting of the Massachusetts State Federation of
Women's Clubs at Marion, June 24th, 1915

The local Committee of the American Society for the Control of Cancer welcomes the opportunity of presenting its plea before this meeting with the greatest eagerness because we believe that there is within the territory which we are expected to cover no body of individuals which have the power to help our campaign as much as it can be helped by the members of the Women's Clubs if they will take hold with us. You ladies represent an enormous number of women who have been in effect automatically selected from the community as the possessors of intelligence and public spirit. The matter which we wish to bring before you is one which is of interest to both sexes and which must be taken up by both sexes, but it is perhaps of even greater interest to women than to men, and moreover in this, as in so many other movements, the community depends primarily on the keener sympathies of women, on their more active public spirit, and incidentally upon the greater aggregate of time which upon the average they are able and willing to devote to public work, as compared with men.

Cancer is to-day the most destructive of all the diseases of adult life. Its actual mortality, not only in the United States, but all over the civilized world, has been shown to be greater than that of any other cause of death except the mortality of infancy and that of tuberculosis at all ages. Among adults its mortality is greater than even that of tuberculosis. Cancer attacks its victims at the time when they are in the most productive period of life, at the time when others are dependent upon them, and when they can least be spared. Of those who have attained the age of forty, one individual in every eleven, one man in every fourteen, one woman in every eight, dies of cancer. This mortality is for the most part preventable. We might ask—If this mortality is not checked how many in this room will die of cancer?—In speaking to you, picked representatives of an intelligent body, we perhaps need not hesitate to put the question in this form. In speaking to the less intelligent, it is better that we should use the form—This mortality can be checked. If it is so checked, how many in this room will have been saved from cancer?

Cancer is a controllable disease. Our scientific knowledge of its origin and methods of dissemination is still on many points imperfect, but our practical power of arresting its onset in an individual case is already good. Its mortality and the suffering which it causes are both for the most part unnecessary and preventable. We believe that from three-fourths to four-fifths of the deaths from cancer with their attendant suffering could be prevented if all the medical profession were imbued, as they soon will be, with our latest knowledge of the disease; and if all the laity were familiar, not with the dreadful symptoms of the disease in its latest stages which need not be mentioned to them, but with the trifling danger signals which contain the warning of its threatened onset in an individual—of its probable appearance in the future if it is left unchecked. For their own safety every member of the laity should know what these danger signals are. The statement that cancer is controllable, a plain, reasonable and reassuring statement of its natural history and nature, so far as that is assuredly known, and a detailed statement of the warning symptoms, is our message to the community. We wish to spread it throughout all classes in the community and we appeal to you as intelligent and progressive women not only to help us spread it among your own membership and to those who are dear to you, but also by your work and efforts with us to assist in spreading it to the less fortunately placed in the community.

The American Society for the Control of Cancer is a body composed of lay men and women from all over the country, together with a large number of members of the medical profession. Its aims, purposes and methods of work have been approved and endorsed by all the leading medical associations of national scope and by many others. It has two purposes, the attainment of further knowledge of the nature of the disease, and the dissemination of the practically useful part of that which we already know.

We are asking you to aid us in this great campaign. It is important that you should know its mechanism and its methods. The Society is a national one; it is indeed of continental scope. Its executive offices are in New York and that city is the headquarters of its salaried workers. It has organized and is organizing local committees in the several states and localities of the Union and of Canada. It is in affiliation with all and is already in active co-operation with most of the nearly sixty existing independent agencies devoted to the cancer campaign which have sprung up all over the Union. It aims to co-ordinate all their activities into one concentrated campaign, in which effort it has met with no opposition, and is attaining great and increasing success. Its efforts toward the acquisition of greater knowledge on the origin and methods of dissemination of the disease are carried on by committees of experts in collaboration with the many existing research organizations. Its campaign for the education of the less progressive members of the medical profession is one of the functions of the central office in collaboration with special cancer committees of the State Medical Associations. Its campaign for popular education is the chief and peculiar function of its local organizations.

The multiplication of independent working bodies involves so much danger of duplication of work, of waste of time, and lack of concentration of effort, that it is our plan to make our local representations committees of the central body in close correspondence with it, and moreover to make them as few, and each of them as widespread in its activities as may in practice prove feasible. For instance, the so-called Boston Committee is expected to cover as much of Southern New England as may prove practicable. We began our work in Boston and now wish to extend it to other communities in our district, taking

them up one by one as centres of interest develop. We ought in the end to be able to do as full and thorough work in each of the many communities throughout this section of the country as we are doing and hope to do in Boston.

In starting the campaign in any district it has proved most practical to select a large city as the starting point, as for instance, Pittsburgh, Boston, St. Louis, San Francisco, etc., and inaugurate the campaign in each place by a large public meeting to which carefully prepared publicity has been given, and at which detailed statements of the possibilities of the control and prevention of cancer, and of the hopefulness of the disease when attacked properly are set forth by speakers furnished by the Society, together with a careful statement of the warning symptoms which characterize the early stages of the disease.

At such meetings bulletins giving the necessary information in brief form are distributed to the audience. These bulletins have been carefully prepared by the Executive Council of the Society, which contains in its membership distinguished pathologists and surgeons from all over the continent. Everything contained in each bulletin has been assented to by every one of these authorities after prolonged discussion of its matter and form, and they may therefore be regarded as reliable and authoritative.

Each such meeting has rendered it possible for us to gather together a committee which was willing to undertake further work in that city; such for instance as the detailed instruction of local nurses and social workers, who, if furnished with the necessary information, are peculiarly qualified by their work to spread it through the community, and who are able to save countless lives and suffering by the detection of individual cases in which the disease is still in the stages in which it is easily curable and in which without their aid it might readily have become hopeless cancer. These committees are also charged with the enlistment of local health authorities in the campaign, with inducing the local press to give publicity to the carefully prepared and authoritative popular articles which the Society prepares weekly, with the organization of further meetings before other bodies, and with other kindred activities. The Society will attempt to provide speakers for any meetings which may be organized.

It is only by detailed work of this kind throughout the country that the ravages of this disease can be put an end to. Even in this first year of our work the enthusiasm which has been evoked and the progress which has been made have been most gratifying, but we have so far touched only isolated cities in each locality. It is our plan to extend such work into the smaller municipalities and towns by association with the central local committees, such as the Boston Committee which is now appealing to you, of sub-committees in each of the other localities in its district, the members of which or some of the members of which, will be members of the Boston Committee and work with it. Such sub-committees should contain members of the local medical profession and the leaders in philanthropic work, both men and women.

In the perfection of this organization, in the spread of the message of hope, and in the bringing of individual cases to relief, we could have no better aid than that of the Women's Clubs in each locality. We ask of you that you will lay before the Clubs which you represent the opportunity which is afforded them not only of learning for themselves and for those who are dear to them the means of escaping this disease, but their opportunity for distributing this information to others who are less fortunately placed. To any of your Clubs which are interested to hold a meeting we will send speakers and if the Club proves, as our experience justifies us in saying most of them will prove, to be suf-

ficiently interested, we will ask individuals among it to aid in instituting further local work in its community.

We would warn you of one obstacle; our experience has been almost uniform that after the first meeting in a given community we have always heard from numerous individuals who have stated that they would have been interested to go but that they feared the subject would be so disagreeable that they have been unable to face it. In practice it has uniformly proved that those who have attended have found the talks so reassuring that the others have regretted that they had not gone, and that there has frequently been a request for a second meeting from the same body, even though the first has usually been well attended. We have learned to put in a word to this effect in advance, and would urge this upon you.

No one of the public health movements has met with greater interest, no one promises more to the community than this. May we have your help in promoting it?